DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 203 823 HE 014 158

TITLE Portraits of Human Greatness.
INSTITUTION Saint Anselm's Coll., Manchester, N.H.
PUB DATE 81
NOTE 7p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Students; Course Content; Curriculum; *Curriculum Design; Educational Objectives; Enrichment; Higher Education; *Humanities; *Humanities Instruction; *Liberal Arts; Program Content
IDENTIFIERS *Saint Anselms College NH

ABSTRACT

Examined is the Humanities Program at St. Anselm College, a two-year program of readings and lectures ordered chronologically from ancient to contemporary times--from the age of Classical Greek thought and the Old Testament to the twentieth century. The first year of the Humanities Program is organized in eight units on general modes of "human greatness" (e.g., the philosopher, the law-giver, the disciple, the scholar) and ranges from the ancient world to the Middle Ages. The second year is organized in 12 units devoted to specific individuals (e.g., Michelangelo, Samuel Johnson, Thomas Jefferson, Darwin, Lenin) and embraces the period from the Renaissance to the present. The program is organized around two seminars a week set aside for discussion of readings selected in terms of the questions raised by each unit, two formal lectures given by members of the faculty and intended to serve as introductions to the seminar readings, and various presentations and films. The stated goal of the Humanities Program is the liberation of the mind, realized by (1) an emphasis on those basic skills that discipline the mind and lead toward competence in seeing things as they are and on eloquence in expression; and (2) the development of habits of looking twice, of asking why, of seeing not only facts but fundamental principles. (Author/LC)

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Portraits of Human Greatness

St. Anselm College
Manchester, N.H.

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The Humanities Program at St. Anselm's College is the heart of its "core curriculum": those studies required of all students at the College and around which the individual student shapes his or her education. Because the Humanities Program is common to all students, all share in a common education in which the same books are read and the same important questions are raised. Behind the Humanities Program is the conviction that it is precisely these books and these questions that are so essential that one cannot lay claim to "education" if one has not read these books -- for example, the Bible, the writings of Plato and Dante, Darwin and Lenin, the Magna Carta and the Declaration of Independence -- and has not reflected upon the profound and perennial questions such works pose.

The organization of the Humanities Program: The Humanities Program at St. Anselm College is a two-year program of readings and lectures ordered chronologically from the ancient world to our own times -- from the age of classical Greek thought and the Old Testament to the 20th century. If the readings and lectures in the Humanities Program are ordered historically this has been done for several reasons: on the one hand, to make possible an ordered sense of the history of Western Civilization; on the other hand, to preserve the chronological order in which the books were written and hence to make them more intelligible. Just as the New Testament is best read after one has read the Old Testament, so also one can better understand a medieval work like The Song of Roland if it has been preceded by Homer's Iliad, the writings of Marx if one has read earlier political theorists like Hobbes and Jefferson. Western Civilization is a long history of events and ideas, both determined in large measure by the events and ideas that had gone before.

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The History of Western thought is the history of an on-going conversation concerning such questions as justice and honor, civil government, moral idealism, God and man. Through the Humanities Program we become participants in this conversation, joining it at its beginnings and following it, not as passive observers but as active participants, until it culminates in the world in which we find ourselves. To have mastered the Humanities Program is to have armed oneself intelligently for a confrontation with the questions posed by contemporary man, the best of them eternal questions often raised by men in the past and about which men throughout the ages have often spoken with wisdom. One can speak, therefore, of a heritage entrusted to us by Western Civilization: a precious and invaluable treasury of thought and action. One essential goal of the Humanities Program is that we make this heritage our own and in doing so find our deepest roots.

The first year of the Humanities Program is organized in eight units on general modes of "human greatness" (e.g. the philosopher, the lawgiver, the disciple, the scholar) and ranges from the ancient world to the Middle Ages; the second year is organized in twelve units devoted to specific individuals (e.g. Michelangelo, Samuel Johnson, Thomas Jefferson, Darwin, Lenin) and embraces the period from the Renaissance to our own time. If the idea of "human greatness" is an organizing principle of the Program's first year, this is because one major purpose of the Program is to raise what are often called "value questions" -- that is, questions which evoke on our part judgments of a specifically ethical and religious character. One way to raise such questions is to reflect upon the modes or forms in which "human greatness" can manifest itself and, in doing so, to ask ourselves about the reasons for attributing or for denying the term "greatness" to the various ways in which the individual can live his or her life. We see, then, that there are really two organizing principles at work in the first year of the

Humanities Program: on the one hand, the historical ordering of our cultural inheritance from the ancient world to the Middle Ages; on the other hand, units devoted to different modes of "human greatness". The first helps to root our reading and reflection within the treasury of Western Civilization; the second helps us to perceive the contemporaneity of what otherwise might appear to be merely past: to see its relevance to ourselves and to the world in which we now live.

The Seminar as the heart of the Humanities Program: Each week during this two-year period there are two seminars set aside for the discussion of readings selected in terms of the questions raised by each unit. These readings are drawn, when possible, from relatively inexpensive paperback books available in the college bookstore; other readings, however, especially those which are fairly brief, are reproduced in two "Humanities Readers". The seminars are very much the heart of the Program: the one occasion when students truly become active participants and can wrestle with the ideas and questions that arise from the readings. These seminars are also the means for unifying the Program: for drawing together into an intelligible whole all those otherwise diverse and unconnected parts of which the Program is composed.

The Seminar as "disciplined conversation": Because of the seminar's central place in the Humanities Program, it is important to understand the ways in which the seminar is different from other courses in which students enroll at St. Anselm College. One obvious difference is that, in order to facilitate a real conversation in which each student can take part, the number of students in a seminar is relatively small -- usually about sixteen to twenty students. Most courses at St. Anselm College, as at other colleges and universities, are lecture courses in which the professor

assumes a dominant role and in which only limited discussion is possible. The seminar, on the other hand, is by definition a conversation in which the professor is merely one of many participants and in which the students speak, not just to the professor, but above all to one another. It is the professor's responsibility to moderate this conversation: for example, by proposing for discussion at the beginning of the seminar a central question arising from the assigned reading, and, during the course of the seminar, by guiding and directing the conversation whenever this becomes necessary. But although one can best understand the seminar by seeing it as a conversation, it must always be a disciplined conversation that demands of each of its participants self-discipline of a real kind: a careful reading of the material being discussed, an attentiveness to what other seminar participants may say, an ability to speak intelligently and to the point. The ultimate success of a seminar never depends exclusively upon the professor who leads the discussion; on the contrary, because the seminar is a conversation, its success depends upon each of its participants. In a real way each is equally responsible for the course the conversation takes and for the seriousness with which the questions at issue are discussed. A "good" seminar is no more and no less than a "good" conversation.

Lectures, Presentations, Films: Although the seminar holds a central place within the Humanities Program, it is but one of the parts of which the Program is composed. Each week there are two formal lectures given by members of the faculty and intended to serve as introductions to the seminar readings, either by placing the readings within a larger historical or cultural context or by suggesting the kinds of

questions we might pose to ourselves as we reflect upon the readings. Occasionally thses lectures take the form of presentations of artistic material, whether visual or musical, whose purpose is to show the ways in which fine arts illuminate the questions with which we are concerned in each unit. Finally, the Humanities Program frequently sponsors evening films and other cultural events which are also an integral part of the Program. All of these diverse parts--seminars, lectures, presentations, films--compose that whole which we call the Humanities Program. One of the main tasks of the seminars is to integrate these parts so that they can be seen in relation to one another and hence as constituting a coherent and intelligible whole.

The Humanities Program as intellectual liberation: Understood as "liberal education", the Humanities Program has as its chief goal that most difficult of all liberations: liberation of mind. The pursuit of this goal is characterized by a two-fold emphasis: first, on those basic skills which discipline the mind and lead toward a competence in seeing things as they are and an eloquence in expressing, both in speech what is perceived; and secondly, on the development of habits of looking twice, of asking why, of seeing not only facts but fundamental principles. The Humanities Program is sustained by a conviction that, if one is to understand what one thinks, one must bring to the surface the half-conscious assumptions which shape one's thoughts and distinguish what is valid and significant from what is merely old or merely contemporary. What is excellent in the past must constantly be rediscovered and made new by relation to the thought and experience of the present. All this demands, while making possible, the capacity for responsible independent thought.

The Humanities Program is therefore an opportunity, but it is also

an arduous task. Its primary objective is nothing less than the intellectual liberation of each student: his or her gradual acquisition of the ability to think critically and independently, to ask questions, to leave nothing unexamined, least of all those things we are inclined to take for granted: our own opinions. After all, what one must first place in question and subject, as best one can, to objective scrutiny, are one's own ideals and values--one's own view of the way things are and ought to be. If we become open and truly critical inquirers, capable of distinguishing good questions from bad ones, of knowing what needs to be placed in question as well as what should be embraced as true--if we become inquirers of this kind, opinion is slowly transformed into knowledge, and our own subjective views correspond more and more to objective reality. The Humanities Program exists in order to give to students the means and the opportunity for growing in just this ideal. In the end, however, realization of the ideal depends upon the seriousness and conscientiousness of the individual student. Where these are lacking the Program must fail; where they are present the Program will flourish and, in doing so, enrich all those who participate in it, teachers and students alike.